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Irwin Russell.

Private Notes.

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"CHRISTMAS GIFT!"

"Christmas-Night in the Quarters," by Irwin Russell, is reproduced for the first time from the original manuscript in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History by the Mississippi Historical Society, in co-operation with the Department of Archives and History and Gordon Marks & Company, Inc., Jackson, December, 1970.

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT OF "CHRISTMAS NIGHT IN THE QUARTERS

BY

IRWIN RUSSELL

"There are books that are written and published with high hopes and ambitious longings, but this volume is in the nature of a memorial to its author. It represents the results of the brief literary career of IRWIN RUSSELL of Mississippi, who was born at Port Gibson, Mississippi, on the 3d of June, 1853, and who died at New Orleans on the 23d of December, 1879. . . .

"Irwin Russell was among the first — if not the very first — of Southern writers to appreciate the literary possibilities of the negro character, and of the unique relations existing between the two races before the war, and was among the first to develop them. The opinion of an uncritical mind ought not to go for much, but it seems to me that some of Irwin Russell's negro-character studies rise to the level of what, in a large way, we term literature. His negro-operetta, "Christmas-Night in the Quarters," is inimitable. It combines the features of a character study with a series of bold and striking plantation pictures that have never been surpassed. In this remarkable group . . . the old life before the war is reproduced with a fidelity that is marvelous."

Joel Chandler Harris, in the Introduction to Poems by Irwin Russell, *1888.*

Christmas Night in the Quarters.

When merry Christmas-day is done,
And Christmas-night has just begun;
While clouds in slow procession drift
To wish the moon-man "Christmas gift,"
Yet linger overhead, to know
What causes all the stir below;
At Uncle Johnny Booker's ball
The darkeys hold high carnival.
From all the countryside they throng,
With laughter, shouts, and scraps of song—
Their whole deportment plainly showing
That to the frolic they are going.
Some take the path with shoes in hand,
To traverse muddy bottom-land;
Aristocrats their steeds bestride—
Four on a mule, behold them ride!
And ten great oxen draw apace
The wagon from "de oder place,"
With forty guests, whose conversation
Betokens glad anticipation.
Not so with him who drives: old Jim
Is sagely solemn, hard and grim,
And frolics have no joys for him.

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He seldom speaks, but to condemn—
Or utter some wise apothegm—
Or else, some crabbed thought pursuing,
Talk to his team, as now he's doing:

Come up heah, Star! Yee-bawce!
You alley is a-laggin'—
Mus' be you think D's dead,
An' dis de hus you's draggin'—
You's mos' too lazy to draw yo' bref,
Let 'lone drawin' de waggin.

Dis team—quit bel'rin, seh!
De ladies don't submit 'at—
Dis team—you ol' fool ox,
You heah me tell you quit 'at?
Dis team's des like de United States;
Dat's what D's tryin' to git at!

De people rides behind
De pollytishners haulin'—
Sh'u'd be a well-bruk ox,
To foller dat 'ar callin'—
An' sometimes muffin won't do dem steers
But what dey mus' be stallin'!

Woo bahgh! Buck-Kannon! Yes, sah,
Sometimes dey will be stickin';
An' den, fus' thing dey knows,
Dey takes a rale good lickin'—
De folks gits down: an' den watch out
For hommerin' an' kickin'!

Dey blows upon dey hands,
Den flings 'em wid de nails up,
Jumps up an' cracks dey heels,
An' pruzntly dey sails up,
An' makes dem oxen humpk deyse'f,
By twistin' all dey tails up!

In this our age of printer's ink,
'Tis books that show us how to think—
The rule reversed, and set at naught,
That held that books were born of thought;
We form our minds by pedants' rules;
And all we know, is from the schools;
And when we work, or when we play,
We do it in an ordered way—
And Nature's self pronounce a ban on,
Whene'er she dares transgress a canon.
Untrammeled thus, the simple race is,

That "works the craps" on cotton-places!
Original in act and thought,
Because unlearned and untaught,
Observe them at their Christmas party:
How unrestrained their mirth—how hearty!
How many things they say and do,
That never would occur to you!
See Brudder Brown—whose saving grace
Would sanctify a quarter-race—
Out on the crowded floor advance,
To "beg a blessin' on dis dance":

O Mahs'r, let dis gathrin' fin' a blessin' in yo' sight!
Don't judge us hard for what we does—you knows it's Chrismus night;
An' all de balence ob de yeah, we does as right's we kin—
Ef dancin's wrong—oh! Mahs'r, let de time excuse de sin!

We labors in de vineya'd—workin' hard, an' workin' true—
Now, shorely you won't notus, ef we eats a grape or two,
An' takes a leetle holiday—a leetle restin'-spell—
Bekase, nex' week, we'll start in fresh, an' labor twicet as well.

Remember, Mahs'r—min' dis, now—de sinfulness ob sin
Is 'pendin' 'pon de sperrit what we goes an' does it in:
An' in a righchis frame ob min' we's gwine to dance an' sing;

a-feelin' like King David, when he cut de pigeon-wing.
For other three stanzas, see end of this piece.
But bless us, please sah, eben ef we's doin' woong to-night,
For den we'll need the blessin' more'n ef we's doin' right;
An' let de blessin' stay wid us, untell we comes to die,
An' goes to Keep our Chris'mus wid dem sheriffs in de sky.

An' now while I's a-pest'rin' you, I mout as well perceed
About anoder matter, what's a sin an' shame indeed;
Hit's dis: dese berry niggers, for whose benefick I pray
Dey is de meanes,' stingy lot, I's seed in all my days!

A rooster makes a sickly crow, wid nuffin' in his craw—
I nebber lays no profits up, frum layin' down de law:
Dese preshis lambs is gone astray—dey'll be in Satun's pen
Widout dey antes up to me for herdin' 'em!—Amen.

(For alterations, see end.)

The rev'rend man is scarcely through,
When all the noise begins anew,
And with such force assaults the ears,
That through the din one scarcely hears
Old Fiddling Josey "sound his A"—
Correct the pitch—begin to play—
Stops, satisfied—then, with the bow,
Rap out the signal dancers know:

Git yo' pardners, fust Kwattilion!
Stomp yo' feet, an' raise 'em high;
June is: "Oh! dat watermillion!
Gwine to git to home bime-bye."
S'lute yo' pardners!—scrape perlitely—
Don't be bumpin' 'gin de res'—
Balance all!—now, step out rightly;
Allug dance yo' lebbel bes'.
F'wa'd foah!—whoop up, niggers!
Back agin!—don't be so slow—
Swing cornahs!—min' de figgers:
When I hollers, den you go.
Top ladies cross ober!
Hol' on, tell I takes a dram—
Gemmen solo!—yes, I's sober—
Kain't say how de fiddle am—
Hands around!—hol' up yo' faces,
Don't be lookin' at yo' feet!
Swing yo' pardners to yo' places!
Dat's de way—dat's hard to beat.
Sides fo'wa'd!—when you's ready—
Make a bow as low's you kin!
Swing acrost wid opp'site lady!
Now we'll let you swap agin—
Ladies change!—shet up dat talkin';

Do yo' talkin' arter while—
Right an' lef!—don't want no walkin'—
Make yo' steps, an' show yo' style!—

And so the "set" proceeds—its length
Determined by the dancers' strength;
And all agree to yield the palm
For grace and skill, to "Georgy Sam,"
Who stamps so hard, and leaps so high,
"Dey watch him!" is the wond'ring cry—
"De nigger mus' be, for a fac',
Dun cousin to a jumpin'-jack!"
On, on, the restless fiddle sounds—
Aye chorussed by the curs and hounds—
Dance after dance succeeding fast,
Till supper is announced at last.
That scene—but why attempt to show it?
The most inventive modern poet,
In fine new words whose ~~x~~ hope and trust is,
Could form no phrase to do it justice!
When supper ends—that is not soon—
The fiddle strikes the same old tune;
The dancers pound the floor again,
With all they have of might and main;
Old gossips, almost turning pale,

Attend Aunt Cassy's gruesome tale
Of conjurors, and ghosts, and devils,
That in the smoke-house hold their revels;
Each drowsy baby droops his head,
Yet scorns the very thought of bed:—
So wears the night; and wears so fast,
All wonder when they find it passed,
And hear the signal sound, to go,
From what few cocks are left to crow.
Then, one and all, you hear them shout:
"Hi! Booker! fotch de banjo out,
An' gib us one song 'fore we goes—
One ob de berry bes' you knows!"
Responding to the welcome call,
He takes the banjo from the wall,
And tunes the strings with skill and care—
Then strikes them with a master's air;
And tells, in melody and rhyme,
This legend of the olden time:

Go 'way, fiddle!—folks is tired o' hearin' you a-squawkin.
Keep silence for yo' betters—don't you heah de banjo talkin'?
'Bout de 'possum's tail, she's gwine to lecter—ladies, listen!—
'Bout de hair what isn't dar, an' why de hair is missin':

"Dar's gwine to be a oberflow," said Noah, lookin' solemn—
For Noah tuk de Herald, an' he read de ribber column—
An' so he sot his hands to work a-clarin' timber-patches
An' 'lowed he's gwine to build a boat to beat de steamah Natchez.

Ol' Noah kep' a-nailin', an' a-chippin', an' a-sawin';
An' all de wicked neighbors kep' a-laughin' an' a-pshawin';
But Noah didn't min' 'em— knowin' what wuz gwine to happen
An' forty days an forty nights de rain it kep' a-drappin'.

Now, Noah had done cotched a lot ob ebry sort o' beas'es—
Ob all de shows a-trabbelin', it beat 'em all to pieces!
He had a Morgan colt, an' sebral head o' Jarsey cattle—
An' druv 'em 'board de Ark as soon's he heered de thunder rattle.

Den sech anoder fall ob rain!—it come so awful hebby,
De ribber riz immejitly, an' busted troo de lebbee;
De people all wuz drownded out—'cep' Noah an' de critters,
An' men he'd hired to work de boat—an' one to mix de bitters.

De Ark she kep' a-sailin', an' a-sailin', an' a-sailin';
De lion got his dander up, an' like to bruk de palin'—
De sarpints hissed—de painters yelled—tell, what wid all de fussin
You cu'dn't hardly heah de mate a-boosin' 'roun' an' cussin'!

Now Ham, de only nigger what wuz runnin' on de packet,
Got lonesome in de barber-shop, an' c'udn't stan' de racket;
An' so, for to amuse he-se'f, he steamed some wood an' bent it,
An' soon he had a banjo made—de fust dat wuz invented.

He wet de ledder, stretched it on; made bridge, an' screws, an' apron;
An' fitted in a proper neck—'twuz berry long an' tap'rin';
He tuk some tin, an' twisted him a thimble for to ring it;
An' den de mighty question riz: how wuz he gwine to string it?

De 'possum had as fine a tail as dis dat I's a-singin';
De ha'rs so long, an' thick an' strong—des fit for banjo-stringin':
Dat nigger shaved 'em off as short as wash-day-dinner graces;
An' sorted ob 'em by de size, frum little E's to basses.

He streng her, tuned her, struck a jig—'twuz "Nebber min' de weddar"—
She soun' like forty-lebben bands, a-playin' all togedder;
Some went to pattin'; some to dancin'; Noah called de figgers—
An' Ham he sot an' knocked de tune, de happiest ob niggers!

Now, sence dat time—it's mighty strange—dar's not de slightes' showin'
Ob any ha'r at all upon de 'possum's tail a-growin';
An' curi's, too—dat nigger's ways: his people nebber los' 'em—
For whar you finds de nigger—dar's de banjo an' de 'possum!

The night is spent; and as the day
Throws up the first faint flash of grey,
The guests pursue their homeward way;
And through the field beyond the gin,
Just as the stars are going in,
See Santa Claus departing — grieving —
His own dear Land of Cotton leaving.
His work is done — he fain would rest,
Where people know and love him best —
He pauses — listens — looks about —
But go he must: his pass is out;
So, coughing down his rising tears,
He climbs the fence and disappears.
And thus observes a colored youth —
(The common sentiment, in sooth):
"Oh! what a blessin' 'twu'd ha' bin,
Ef Santy had been born a twin!
We'd hab two Chris'muses a yeah —
Or p'r'aps one brudder'd settle heah!"

(In the prayer, in above, instead of three last stanzas, read:)
It seems to me — indeed it do — I mebbe mount be wrong —
That people raly ought to dance, when Chrismus comes along;
Des dance bekase dey's happy — like de birds hops in de trees:
De fine-top fiddle soundin' to de bowin' ob de breeze.

We's got no ark to dance afore, like Isrul's prophet King;
We's got no harp to soun' de chords, to help us out to sing;
But 'cordin' to de gif's we has, we'll do de bes' we knows—
An' folks don't 'spise de vi'let-flow'r, bekase it ain't de rose.

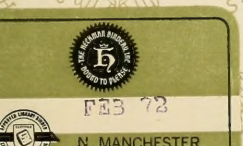
You bless us, please sah, eben ef we's doin' wrong to-night;
'Kase den we'll need de blessin' more'n ef we's doin' right;
An' let de blessin' stay wid us, untell we comes to die,
An' goes to keep our Chris'mus wid dem sheriffs in de sky.'

Yes, tell dem preshis angels we's a-gwine to jine 'em soon;
Our voices we's a-trainin' for to sing de glory-tune;
We's ready when you wants us, an' it ain't no matter when—
Oh! Mahs'r, call yo' chillen soon, an' take 'em home!—Amen.

"

Irwin Russell.

For The Irwin Russell Memorial
from
Mary Elizabeth Russell.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